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# KING'S

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# Theological Review

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# THE PLACE OF REASON IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

## Towards a Theological Aesthetic

MARTIN ROBERTS

In attempting to elucidate the place of reason in Christian theology, we will raise fundamental issues, both at philosophical and practical levels, relating to the identity of Christian faith.

But why do we need to concern ourselves so centrally with reason in identifying Christian faith? Does theology need a rational metaphysics (and is a science of theology possible?) or should reason submit itself entirely to faith, admitting its own inadequacy in matters of religion? Or again can reason and faith be reconciled, rather than polarised, without compromising the revelatory quality of the latter, in a 'closed' Hegelian-type systematisation of reason? Why can't Christianity understand itself exclusively in terms of its own authoritative traditions or else operate at the practical level, regarding itself as a response and solution to the dictates of the moral conscience?

These may indeed be possible ways of approaching Christian faith (and each approach would involve a particular kind of theological self-understanding) but they all imply a somewhat sceptical attitude to the place of reason in Christian faith and its theological articulation. This is not surprising if we take seriously the impact and influence of enlightenment epistemology which has pervaded our thinking and outlook to this day. The critical spirit of the enlightenment, which we take for granted today, regards scepticism, provisionality and relativity as the qualities of an educated mind and sophisticated sensibility. But such a sensibility does not readily accord with the inner qualities (such as dependence, prayer, grace and so forth) implicit in the revelation-based nature of Christian faith. For if it is accepted that Christian faith possesses a revelatory quality (in so far as it arises out of and reflects upon the supposed 'revelation' of the Christ-event, over and above an independently derived religious philosophy) then that quality must necessarily be related to reason in such a way that, unlike 'closed' systems of reason, makes for an illumination of reason and its speculative (open-ended) dynamic as it encounters Christian revelation. That is, revelation elicits some rational expression of itself (in the sense of an open-ended speculative dynamic, if there is to be anything communicated to us or illuminated for us) which, by so doing, bursts assunder any 'closed' system of reason. In other words, if the integrity and indeed, possibility, of revelation is to be established, it must be conceded that revelation *both* points us beyond reason *and*, in the very process, elicits from us an open-ended speculative ascent, which bears witness to the reality of revelation. In this sense, reason and revelation belong together. But it is precisely *reason*, which, since the enlightenment, has been devastatingly criticised at this very point, namely, in its alleged capacity to reach out beyond itself or in any way to be cognizant of revelation.

It should be noted, however, that an attempt to square revelation with reason, in view of enlightenment epistemology itself manifests some of the characteristics of that epistemology in that it has to operate by exploration, in terms of an open-

ended speculative ascent to an alleged 'higher' illumination or revelation. Now this may mean that we have to sacrifice 'certainty' for the possibility of hope and creativity which, we believe authenticate themselves in their own processes.

In fact, post-enlightenment Christian thinkers to the present day, have produced systems or at least methodologies which attempt to square Christian revelation and its theological self-understanding, with modern, 'secular' sensibilities. The price paid for such an achievement is often costly both for reason and for revelation. Either reason is swallowed up in revelation, deprived of its speculative dynamic, or else revelation is reduced to the proportions of a 'closed' system of reason. The result, either way, is to do violence to the structure of reason and revelation, respectively, and in their relationship to each other. For reason, by its inner dynamic, thrusts beyond itself in a suprarational direction and that movement of the reason may at least imply something like revelation if it is to 'release' its own inner dynamic and be internally consistent with itself. Now revelation, as something intrinsically illuminative, may in turn elicit a speculative ascent of reason towards itself. But the relation between them may be open-ended and indeterminate, if their mutual *freedom*, as such, is not to be 'closed' in a fixed system. Thus, reason and revelation seem to require and suppose each other, both on their terms (that is, as requirements of their own inner dynamics, which includes their respective freedoms) and in terms of their mutual relatedness (in so far as they 'elicit' each other), their 'passing over' into each other.

Now Kant's critique of the speculative thrust of reason towards the suprarational, rules out the possibility of reason and revelation 'passing over' into each other (in a mutuality of freedom and giving) and instead, he confines the intent of the suprarational thrust of reason to an exclusively *practical* employment of reason. But the result is unfavourable to reason in its internal self-relatedness. It frustrates the self-transcending structure of reason. Perhaps an alternative to Kant's speculative/practical (and regulative/constitutive) division of reason with itself, is to take *on trust* the wholeness of reason (as both speculative and practical, regulative and constitutive), so that it may be allowed to display itself as a *self-authenticating* structure of 'revelatory reason', that is, the dynamic unity of reason and revelation, in an open-ended sense. Such an open-ended structure of reason, taken 'on trust' expresses, both intellectually and emotionally, theoretically and practically, a response to reality as essentially grace-bestowing. That is, the self-authenticating structure of 'revelatory reason', which we envisage, implies what may be recognised as a theology of grace, based on 'trust'.

Kant did not see this alternative, or perhaps he lacked the courage to 'trust' that reason may be structured in this way. But if reason turns out to be an open-ended, self-authenticating structure, in the way we have described, then that structure, we further contend, requires *theological* categories of interpretation. For it is the self-explanation of a revelatory ('open' rather than 'closed') structure of reason. Thus, man's reason, in its intrinsic thrusting beyond itself (towards revelation) discloses an internal movement of trust and commitment to that open-ended, self-explanatory unity of reason and revelation. In fact, it is by understanding the wholeness of reason and revelation in its open structure of freedom-in-giving (and upon which our reasoning is

ultimately dependent) that we come to speak of God as the 'in itself' of reason and revelation thus defined. Our knowledge of Him is then participational, the proper exercising of our own reason.

Having argued for the centrality of reason in Christian theology and its intrinsic connection with revelation, through its suprarational thrust beyond itself, an attempt will now be made to formulate a basic theological sensibility (given a post-enlightenment context) in terms of which the concerns of reason and a revelation-based theology can be adequately expressed. That is, we will outline an approach which, operating 'on trust' and in full recognition of the challenges of critical philosophy, nevertheless seeks to steer a course through Kant's reduction (at the speculative level) of reason, on the one hand, and the post-Kantian explorations of the practical reason (in the interest of faith, as opposed to knowledge, in the Kantian sense) on the other. In other words, we will be searching for a 'third' option which will make possible a theological sensibility which overcomes an 'either/or' attitude to the capacities of reason in relation to revelation (that is, *either* faith *or* knowledge, but not both, in Kant's estimation of the suprarational thrust of reason) in favour of a 'both/and' approach which, uniting the speculative and practical interest of reason, on trust, moves towards an expansive (open-ended) yet synthetic (because the inner dynamic of reason is 'released', preventing the self-frustration of reason) wholeness of reason with itself. We will then enquire to the 'in itself' of this theological sensibility, by asking how reason operates in the life of God.

It is worth mentioning here, by way of an extended footnote to our discussion, that our concern for a theological sensibility, such as we have described, is important not only for reason itself, but also at the practical level of experience in the Christian communities of faith. For within the Christian tradition, practical experience, unless it also submits itself to reason, can (and has) moved in directions which would invalidate the sort of theological sensibility we are striving towards. If one takes, for instance, the testimony of certain mystics, such as is found in the *Cloud of Unknowing*, it soon becomes apparent that the suprarational thrust of reason in mystical experience, involves a radical discontinuity between reason and revelation which, we believe, is dangerously un-Christian, reflecting rather badly on the God of Christian revelation, whose 'logos' is believed to be active in creation, incarnation and redemption.

But to return to our search for a viable theological sensibility, we will now examine the inner qualities and properties of our life of reason, as it thrusts beyond itself towards revelation, to see what basic *tendencies* are present, and how they 'disclose' that to which they tend (i.e. revelation). This will hopefully enable us to grasp more clearly the 'shape' of our theological sensibility.

Perhaps the first tendency we find in our reason's thrusting beyond itself, is that towards *convergence*. (It is 'first' in a systematic sense only, it has no 'actual' priority over any other tendency). That is, the thrust of reason towards revelation or reason's self-overtaking, produces a convergence in the reason whereby the mind is elevated to an intuition of itself within a greater 'whole', such as cannot be achieved by the processes of dialectical reasoning as such. It is the affective, intuitive and indeed religious grasp of that

which is strictly 'above' and 'beyond' the reason, that which fires the mystics' vision. However, 'actual' convergence (in the sense of eliminating the rational process) is never completed before another (and opposite) tendency is discerned, that towards *recurrence*. Far from eliminating the rational process, the heightened awareness gained in the tendency towards convergence actually renews the imaginative capacities of the suprarational thrust of reason to perceive new 'inscapes' (to use Hopkins's word) and connections which actually reinvigorate the recurrence of the dialectical processes of reason. But the tendency towards recurrence itself can never be fully realised without, in its turn, reinvigorating the opposite tendency towards convergence. Thus, convergence and recurrence are mutually inclusive tendencies which can be properly comprehended, not in terms of those tendencies themselves (for they can never be made fully 'actual') but only in terms of that *within* which (the mysterious 'in itself' of their mutuality) they are tendencies. Or, to use a Coleridgean phrase, we can only delineate their respective tendencies in terms of their mutually inclusive 'ultimate aim'. Now these two tendencies, towards convergence and recurrence, pertain to the suprarational thrust of reason, and to reason, in its dialectical processes, respectively. What their 'ultimate aim' is, can only be known as we are *referred* back to those tendencies and their dynamic interaction which, in the first place, pushed us towards their ultimate aim. In other words, there is no actual priority of 'ultimate aim', over against these tendencies, which is accessible to us. It is only given to us 'on trust', *in* these tendencies.

We have then, described a theological sensibility which is characterised by the tendencies towards convergence and recurrence. In fact, we can only grasp the interconnection of these tendencies aesthetically, as we move imaginatively between them. In other words, it looks as if our theological sensibility expresses itself as a *theological aesthetic*, that is, it can only be grasped as a theologically-defined aesthetic appreciation of the life of reason. This aesthetic appreciation is theologically defined in the sense that reason, thrusting towards revelation, discloses God-in-us, in the creative and ultimate dependence of our reason upon the God in whom we have come to trust, through our reasoning. In God, we perpetually 'lose' and 'find' our life precisely in our reason's tendencies towards convergence and recurrence.

But what are we to make of God and the place of reason in Him, given that theological categories are required to express our theological sensibility as essentially a theological aesthetic?

If the convergence and recurrence of reason and its suprarational thrust is ultimately dependent upon God, 'on trust', then the 'knowledge' of that mysterious revelatory reality (God) *in* which reason operates, can only be available to us as we are referred back, by God, to those tendencies of convergence and recurrence where reason manifests itself as such. This means that reason, in its fullness, is disclosed as the *ultimate* reality, in so far as it is perpetually initiated (in its self-questioning of itself), completed (in its tendency towards convergence) and reinvigorated (in its tendency towards recurrence). Reason is therefore, a projectively self-contained movement (taken 'on trust' and in an open-ended sense) of divine creation in which we 'find' and 'lose' ourselves. But precisely as a divine creation, reason 'images' in us the life of God himself, in so far as the divine reason is

made known to us in the religious 'ultimate aim' of our reason's employment.

If reason is then the quality of divine creation and the measure of the divine life itself, it may be noted that the undeniable mystery of God's reason is 'above' and 'within' our reasoning, but also 'beyond' it, in the sense that its grace-bestowing qualities create our very reasoning capacities in their ultimate 'tendencies' towards Himself. However, God's reason preserves the freedom and integrity of our rational response to *comprehend*, not to eliminate, that which is 'beneath' itself, namely, human reason. There is, even in this mystery of reason, in its divine/human dimensions, a comprehension, a mutuality, an illumination and interpretation, on the basis of grace and creation. For Christian theology, surely, the transcendence of God's reason must be incarnational, it must always allow for *our* responsive knowledge of Him, in convergences and recurrences of our reasoning, rather than the final elimination of our reason in the divine abyss.

God's transcendence therefore, is that of the mystery of grace and its expression in creation, making possible a correspondence between ourselves and Him in the diversified yet continuous life of reason. He is the 'in itself' of our theological sensibility, enabling the progressive cultivation of a theological aesthetic, as we respond to Him and to all things, in the life of reason.

To conclude: We have argued for a necessary connection between reason and Christian revelation, defending this connection both on epistemological and religious grounds. What we have ended with is an expansive yet synthetic reason which, operating 'on trust', as a theological aesthetic, enables us to appreciate the wholeness of the life of reason, including both the human and the divine. Our approach is certainly risky, in that it does not provide us with easily gained certainties, but it may provide hope, creativity and transformation. We can do no more than proceed on trust and see the wisdom of a position that does not insist on certainties which require 'closed' systems in which to cast the life of reason.

## The Psalms Come Alive

JOHN H. EATON

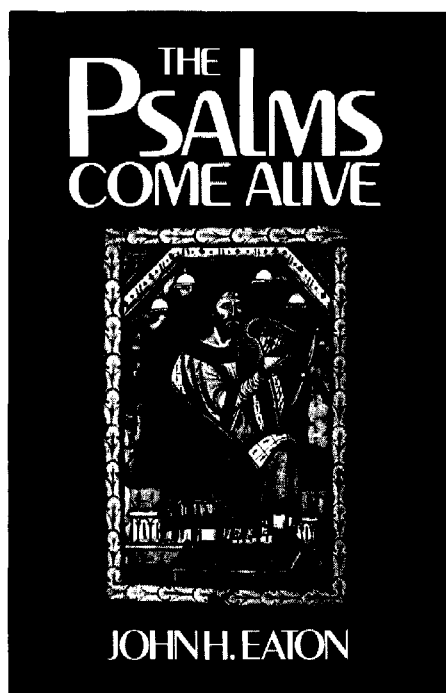
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John Eaton has been lecturer in Old Testament and Hebrew in the Department of Theology at Birmingham University since 1956, and he is now Reader in Old Testament Studies.

The black and white illustrations in the book are by the author's wife, Margaret.

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## DISCUSSION

### REGARDING THE APOCALYPSE

ULRICH SIMON

'The obscene, sadistic fantasy of *Revelation* 6-20.' Thus my former colleague John Austin Baker in the *King's Theological Review*.<sup>1</sup> It is a remarkable statement from one who is now the Bishop of Salisbury. If known in Catholic and Orthodox circles it would be sufficient to demolish ecumenical hopes.

But what of the truth of this evaluation? After all my friend John Baker is a Biblical scholar, who even in the context of the nuclear debate, can hardly deviate from sound principles of exegesis. For example, he cannot wish to divorce the Apocalypse of John from the 'little' apocalypses, first in Mark 13 and then in Matthew 25-26. I have examined all this material in *The End is not Yet* of 1964. Then it was generally acknowledged that Jesus adhered firmly to an eschatological conception of the Kingdom of God. One did not have to follow Schweitzer and Weiss in their radical critique to place the Christ of the Gospels within the apocalyptic expectation. In the light of Qumran, especially of the War between the children of Light and Darkness, it almost seemed then that the Jesus of the Liberals had never existed and would never exist again.

Nevertheless it must be acknowledged that there always has been an 'educated' dislike of, and opposition to, the apocalyptic trend. After 70 A.D. and even more so after 135 A.D., the Jews in their official deliberations concluded that they owed their disasters to apocalyptic expectations and that the future of Judaism must be free from them. They did not always succeed, but on the whole Torah ousted *Chazon* (=vision). The Church, too, in her second and third generation had a powerful wing which would have excluded the Apocalypse. This interesting history of pro and contra has never ceased.

But I am not now concerned with the history of the book but with the question: Is *Revelation* 6-20 'obscene and sadistic'? Is this a 'fantasy'? The easy way out would be something like this: all human discourse is ambiguous, depending on who says what to whom and in what circumstances. Thus with the Apocalypse and its vocabulary: The Lamb opens the seals, noise of thunder, four beasts, a white horse, a bow, a crown, a red horse, a black horse, a pale horse . . . The Great Day has dawned. Now this is obviously the kind of poetry which cannot be associated with diocesan reports or minutes, committee procedures or computer abstracts. We are in a different world. But should it be evaluated as 'obscene, sadistic fantasy'? If so, Dante, Milton, Botticelli, Blake, Mozart, Verdi and many others must also be written off, for there is a *tradition* of apocalyptic fear and trembling.

True, there are some theologians who discount and even despise the 'constraints' of history and of culture. They are not impressed by the permanent witness given to mankind in poetry, painting, and music. Others, like myself, regard this well-spring of Christian creativeness as one energy of the Holy Spirit, the most available gift of the divine Presence.

Be that as it may, what is it that makes a Bishop label apocalyptic as 'obscene and sadistic' when others (perhaps bishops in prison!) cherish *Revelation* chs. 6 ff. as 'pure and manifest and appropriate' on the one hand, and 'gentle and tender and consoling' on the other? I have perhaps already indicated the dividing line, which is, after all, not so remote from the 'constraints of history'. Or shall I call it 'existential'? To be sure, *Revelation* is written by martyrs for martyrs at a time of martyrdom, but it is not therefore confined to that scope. All human beings who long for justice, yearn for Christ the Victor, loathe the enemy, such as falsehood and all the devilish horrors of a perverted 'civilisation', take their stand with those in white robes, baptized into the *militia Dei*, enduring the mental strife as well as the physical privations implied by the imitation of Christ.

Certainly the fervour of the apocalyptic expectation is strongest among those who have every reason to cry 'How long, Lord!'. They cannot be accused of vindictiveness by our liberal friends. In the hands of the Gestapo, forced into the Gulag, attacked by Amin thugs etc., one simply longs for 'the end'. But the Apocalypse chapters under review are mostly supportive of the Victory of Truth and the defeat of Antichrist. The Wrath of the Lamb is the marvellously paradoxical expression which serves here, and again one thinks of the iconography and the liturgy of the Lamb of God. I know of no passages in Scripture which have been and are more comforting than the readings for All Saints Day. Moreover Christians believe that these innumerable saints have not only overcome in death but that they are blessed, 'rest from their labours', are alive eternally. The marriage of the Lamb leads to the celestial banquet and the final acclamation of God as God. All this is spelt out not only in the text but also in the great commentaries, some of the last 40 years alone. I cannot believe that the Bishop of Salisbury has forgotten A. M. Farrer among so many others of distinction, who did not regard the Day of Wrath, the Fall of Babylon, the Songs of Triumph, the messianic kingdom, the eschatological combat, the new Jerusalem as spurious and unacceptable elements in Christian belief.

But, it may be said, the argument is about nuclear arms and all this stuff, Biblical and exegetical, is out of date. There is certainly a polarisation, as strong as ever, between those who repudiate the cosmic dream and the eschatological dimension, and those who do not. I heard Rabbi Hertzberg a few weeks ago who as a leader of American Jews openly lectured against Messianism and the Zionist dream. He pleaded for educational norms, tangible aims, institutional health. On the other hand the former Marxist Ernst Bloch, whose *Prinzip Hoffnung* has just been translated into English, and to whom Moltmann owes so much of his theology, pleads that a non-Utopian religion is nothing at all, and that Jesus opened the gates to the great dream. One may remember that the liberation of the Blacks in the USA started as Martin Luther King's Dream, and this dream has always been strongly entrenched in the Apocalypse. Its comfort has been other-worldly, but its action has been here and now.

The debate is not really about nuclear weapons, but about Christ and Antichrist, about truth and lies. The cosmic dimension in this struggle cannot be left out and only the apocalyptic can provide the imagery, whereas the philosophical (as in *Hebrews*) yields the rational structure. Does not the canon of Scripture demand that nothing is to be read in

isolation? Indeed if some NT scholars are to be heeded the Apocalypse is not to be separated from the corpus of Johannine writings.

1. John Austin Baker, 'Theology and Nuclear Weapons', *King's Theological Review* 6 (1983), p. 2.

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